Skilled Dialogue: Weaving Webs of Connected Across Diverse Voices and Identities

Isaura Barrera and Lucinda Kramer

The good teacher must stand where personal and public meet, dealing with a thundering flow of traffic at an intersection where 'weaving a web of connectedness' feels more like crossing a freeway on foot." (Palmer, 1998, p. 17)

As differences increasingly challenge our willingness and ability to connect with others, it is important to rethink our understanding of diversity. Cultural and linguistic differences, as well as differences of other sorts, are all too often perceived only as potential or actual obstacles to desired communication and interaction. Yet, this is only one aspect of their nature. Up until now, we have tended to underplay their other aspect: their nature as life-enhancing opportunities. Growing data on the need to recognize and preserve diversity at the biological and environmental levels highlight the need to recognize and preserve this aspect of diversity at human and cultural levels (Nabhan, 1997).

This article discusses the Skilled Dialogue approach as a practical framework to help teachers access the richness of diverse perspectives and weave webs of connectedness that honor the identity and voice of all concerned, not just those from the culture deemed to be normative. More specifically, the authors identify specific Skilled Dialogue strategies for increasing our response to diversity as something that is more than a set of differences inherent in a certain population, and that offers rich opportunities for expanding and enriching, rather than dividing and limiting. These strategies focus on the process of crafting interactions that are respectful (i.e., honor diverse identities), reciprocal (i.e., honor diverse voices), and responsive (i.e., honor connections across differences). Each strategy supports perceiving and working with diversity from a perspective that acknowledges and integrates its nature as both a challenge and an incredibly valuable resource.

Seeing Differences Differently(1)

Current literature on diversity reflects three perceptions of differences. First, it reflects a perception of differences as being based on what something or someone is not. That is, the tendency is to first identify a referent reality-typically the EuroAmerican Normative Culture (ENC) (2)-and then identify what is not like that reality. Extended families, for example, are often understood only as being what nuclear families are not. Behaviors that are not similar to those associated with independence in one culture (e.g., ENC) are automatically classified as not independent (i.e., dependent), even if, in fact, they more accurately fit an entirely different category, such as interdependence. This bias toward contrast subtly yet insistently attaches differences to those who are not like those who exhibit ENC values, beliefs, and behaviors. If certain behaviors, values, and beliefs are

"different," then those who exhibit them are the ones who are "diverse." From this perspective, one reality (i.e., one culture) is perceived as normative; all others are perceived as being diverse.

In a second perception, differences a re contradictory; that is, if something is not like A, it must contradict A. This perception is undergirded by an "either-or" perspective that places one reality at one end of a continuum and the contrasting reality at the other end. Such a placement implies that to get to one, the other must be somehow left behind or accessed only when the first is not. The resulting tension between diverse cultural practices consequently leads to the "living in two [hyphenated] worlds" experiences described in the literature (e.g., Lahiri, 2006).

Finally, a third perception follows from the first two: the perception that differences divide rather than connect. Differences between people are then almost automatically perceived as disagreements, instead of distinctions that offer rich alternatives. This perception confuses being distinct with being separate and promotes the need to defend rather than to collaborate.

Taken together, these three perceptions can actually undermine the very goals of those who sincerely and persistently work to honor and respect differences. They can, in fact, perpetuate a misunderstanding of diversity that resists being truly responsive to it. A resulting tendency of these perceptions is to be threatened rather than intrigued by diverse lifestyles and cultural mores.

Skilled Dialogue is designed to stimulate a shift in these perceptions. It does so in at least three ways: by focusing practitioners' perspectives on what others do, rather than do not do; by framing realities along an inclusive spectrum, rather than on an exclusive continuum; and, finally, by providing specific strategies for transforming contradictions into paradox.

Anchored Understanding of Diversity and 3rd Space

Two skills underlie *Skilled Dialogue: Anchored Understanding of Diversity and 3rd Space* (Barrera & Kramer, 1997). These skills provide the context for the strategies discussed in the next section. The first-Anchored Understanding of Diversity-is about choosing being in relationship over being in control. It shifts general, abstract, controllable knowledge about diversity toward concrete, experiential, relational knowledge of individual students and families.

With Anchored Understanding of Diversity, knowledge acquires a personal context. That is, it becomes about someone we actually know and are in relationship with (e.g., with Maria, not just "a Hispanic child"). Resulting face-to-face interactions create conceptual contexts within which previously held categories and assumptions can be challenged and diverse behaviors can be understood for what they are, rather than just what they are not. Within specific and personal relationships, for example, an interdependent way of

relating with others is more easily understood as a valid set of behaviors within its own right, and not just "not independent" or, consequently, "dependent."

The skill of Anchored Understanding of Diversity favors relationship, which is always personal and unpredictable, over control, which likes generalizations and predictability. Anchoring our understanding of diversity in the personal and particular invites us to understand how others' behaviors make sense from their personal experiential perspective as well as from a broader cultural perspective. Anchored Understanding of Diversity takes social and cultural generalities (e.g., Hispanics value X and Y behaviors) and tempers them with the uniqueness of individuality, reducing them to only probabilities (e.g., Maria, a Hispanic mother, may value X and Y behaviors, depending on context, history, and personality).

3rd Space-the second skill essential to Skilled Dialogue-focuses on identifying and leveraging the complementarity of two or more contradictory behaviors or perspectives. While the term "third space" is not uncommon in recent literature (e.g., Guti□rrez, Baquedano-Lopez, & Tejeda, 1999; Hannula, 2001; Moje et al., 2004), 3rd Space is defined more narrowly within Skilled Dialogue(3). As used within this framework, 3rd Space refers to a specific and distinct skill that uses three strategies to creatively reframe and integrate contradictions-where the presence of one thing excludes the other-into paradoxes-where the presence of one thing is in complementary relationship with the other.

3rd Space is a skill designed to address apparent contradictions posed by diverse perspectives (e.g., valuing autonomy over communal interdependence). In such situations, 3rd Space facilitates the co-construction of options within which the strengths of one perspective complement the strengths of the other (e.g., What does autonomy look like in communal and interdependent contexts? How can it complement those contexts? And vice versa: What does communal interdependence look like in autonomous contexts? How can it complement these contexts?).

The following characteristics expand on the characteristics inherent to this skill:

* Reality is perceived as non-dichotomous; it is more of a spectrum than a continuum. As such, it dissolves "us-them," either-or dichotomies.

* There are always at least three (or more) choices. This aspect of 3rd Space requires creatively generating alternatives beyond the obvious and dualistic choices.

* "The whole is more than the sum of the parts." The idea that two or more perspectives, no matter how seemingly contradictory, can be somehow combined or integrated is a core aspect of the 3rd Space skill, which allows differences to be perceived as complementary and not divisive. Using 3rd Space, boundaries are negotiated as both distinctions and points of contact that, like the poles of a battery, generate constructive rather than destructive tension when connected.

The two skills of Skilled Dialogue are each associated with three strategies for weaving webs of connectedness across differences (see Table 1). While the scope of this article prohibits a detailed discussion of the Skilled Dialogue process, a brief review of these strategies will serve to illustrate applications to understanding and responding respectfully, reciprocally, and responsively to diversity, including cultural linguistic diversity. These strategies are not linear but will be discussed sequentially, starting from the top with those designed to establish respect through the honoring of diverse identities, followed by those just below that focus on establishing authentic reciprocity through the honoring of diverse and even contradictory voices, and concluding with the strategies that focus on strengthening responsiveness by achieving connection without sacrificing differences.

The first set of strategies-welcoming and allowing-focuses on shifting perceptions of differences as "disagreements" to differences as simply differences. This shift creates the base for subsequent connections. The first of these-welcoming-addresses the need to understand diverse words, behaviors, beliefs, and perspectives as expressions of identity anchored in particular sets of evidence that, while different from our own, are no less legitimate. Its core is identifying and questioning our assumptions about power (e.g., am I assuming that I know more or better? Am I assuming that I am somehow more powerful than the person with whom I am interacting-somehow more capable than he or she?). These assumptions are often implicit, subtle convictions that privilege one worldview and set of skills over another. Speaking a language other than English, for example, is sometimes seen as limiting; yet it is no less competent or functional than speaking English. It is simply responsive to a distinct context. Similarly, a mother with no set bedtime for her child is not somehow "doing it wrong"; she is simply doing it differently, based on her experiential and cultural contexts. So, this first strategy of welcoming invites us to recognize that differences do not make others wrong; they simply make them different. This is not to negate the need to increase skills, but rather to shift the basis for change from a deficit perspective to a competence perspective. Such a perspective places emphasis on the desire to add what is needed to become functional in an additional context, rather than on a perceived need to eliminate an existing behavior or belief.

Welcoming differences takes us into paradox, because it invites us to suspend separation and division, a 3rd Space strategy. "Allowing," our name for this strategy, makes this suspension explicit. In allowing, we choose to let differences exist side-by-side as legitimate in their own right, without needing to judge or interpret them as contradictory to our refeent behaviors and beliefs. The question "Am I releasing my 'stories' about what is and what I think could be?" is a prompt to remind us that perceptions and interpretations are just that: "stories" we tell ourselves about others rather than unquestioned truths. With these two strategies-welcoming and allowing-Skilled Dialogue makes concrete the quality of respect.

Up to this point, the Skilled Dialogue framework is not so different from other approaches that value a "both-and" perspective. The next two strategies, however, move

it beyond this simple side-by-side perspective by promoting reciprocity: a deep sense of another's diverse behaviors, values, and beliefs as valuable not just to them but to ourselves as well. Without reciprocity, there is a concomitant tendency to "listen for what we expect to hear. We sift through others' views for what we can use to make our own points" (Kahane, p. x, 2004). Only when we allow diverse behaviors and beliefs to stand beside our own can we shift from tactical listening to relational listening, which "open[s] our minds to discover the limitations in [our] own ways of thinking" (p. x). The strategy of allowing sets the stage for an active search of the strengths and values within precisely what is different and unfamiliar.

The strategies associated with reciprocity address this search more specifically. The first of these is sense-making. Sense-making focuses on finding a context within which another's diverse behaviors and beliefs "make sense"; a point where I can honestly say, "That makes sense to me; I'd probably do the same thing in his/her shoes." Its critical question is precisely that: "Can I honestly say, That makes sense to me; I'd probably do the same thing in his/her shoes'?" The goal of asking this question is to focus on the competent thinking and problem-solving that has generated those behaviors and beliefs-and that will provide the basis for desired growth.

Once diverse behaviors and beliefs are understood (i.e., make sense), it is easier to appreciate their value. Appreciating-the second strategy associated with reciprocity-recognizes that no single perspective holds all the answers. It seeks to identify and mine the strengths and gifts of diverse perspectives. The questions associated with appreciating are: What can I learn from others' behaviors/beliefs? and What can I find in how others act/behave/believe that is of value to me? The exploration of these questions cements both respect and reciprocity, making partners rather than givers and receivers. It is only after a true partnership has been established that the most responsive and equitable options can be generated.

The last two strategies focus on the creation of integrative and collaborative "third choices" that do not require compromise. The first of these strategies-connecting-makes explicit the relational dynamics that sustain the current situation. It asks, "What am I doing or saying to promote or sustain current behaviors/ beliefs?" In asking this question, it refuses to divide responsibility and say, "Oh, that's their problem, not mine." In the spirit of reciprocity, it recognizes that all problems are mutually generated at some level and acknowledges that change is something that starts as much with ourselves as with another.

Harmonizing-the second strategy in this set-leverages identified connections by finding the complementarity between apparent opposites. Its questions are: What about my behaviors/beliefs complements the behaviors/beliefs that, on the surface, appear contradictory? and What might I get if I put the two together? This is a unique way of thinking about diversity. Intrinsic to it is the willingness to break out of dualistic either-or dichotomies and "think in 3s." The brief example below adds additional detail.

A Brief Example

Skilled Dialogue strategies can be applied to any interaction in which different beliefs and viewpoints create tension or miscommunication. Let's say, for the sake of discussion, that a parent believes the teacher is too "permissive" and wants more direct instruction, while the teacher believes the parent is too highly structured with her child and doesn't allow enough exploration and free play. Here's what Skilled Dialogue might look like, with the teacher taking the lead.

Welcoming: The teacher becomes aware that she is making the assumption that her way is the best and that the parent's view is based not on equally valid evidence, but on a lack of appropriate information about child development.

Allowing: The teacher decides to drop her "story" that her way is the only truly evidence-based view, and to stop trying to convince the parent of the need to change (this doesn't mean she drops her beliefs, only that she allows the parent's apparently contradictory beliefs to stand side-by-side with her own until she can establish a more respectful base for interaction).

Sense-making: The teacher sets time aside for unpressured discussions with the parent and tells her she wants to learn more about why the parent feels so strongly about structure. She listens relationally and, as she perceives that the parent feels she is an equal partner in the discussion, gradually discusses her own feelings about the need for less-structured exploration and free play.

Appreciating: The teacher asks herself what is of value in the parent's perspective that she might be discounting or not paying enough attention to. She becomes aware that she has been so focused on the need for exploration and free play that she has not highlighted her own use of structure, and shares that with the parent.

Connecting: The teacher thus realizes that as she herself has pushed for one view to the exclusion of the other, she has modeled that behavior to the parent-who has done the same. She has not modeled the need to be open to unfamiliar perspectives, the very behavior she wishes from the parent!

Harmonizing: As the teacher has used the Skilled Dialogue strategies with the parent, she has, in fact, already begun to harmonize their divergent perspectives. She is now ready to ask the parent in a much more authentic way, "How can we work together so that we can be truly responsive to your child's needs as well as our own?" They explore the complementary relationship between openness and structure; they discuss how one in fact supports the other; and they explore what it might look like if the two were integrated rather than made contradictory.

Conclusion

This very brief scenario offers a glimpse into how interactions can be transformed from being contradictory to being complementary. It is through such strategies that Skilled Dialogue highlights the need for relationships, as well as for "setting the stage for

miracles." Rather than seeing persons through the filter of a singular perspective and being bound by the expectations tied to that perspective, Skilled Dialogue seeks to establish respectful, reciprocal, and responsive engagement with particular and individual persons, thereby making space for the unexpected and unpredictable possibilities of unique relationships (i.e., "miracles"). This shift of perspective minimizes the risk of stereotyping and maximizes access to the richness of diversity. In doing so, Skilled Dialogue becomes a valuable tool that shifts teachers from "helping" children and families acculturate to weaving webs of connectedness that mine the riches of all the perspectives brought to the table.

Notes:

1 See reference list for sources that provide more detail.

2 This term is used by Barrerra, Corso, and Macpherson (2003) to refer to the institutionalized cultural norms against which cultural linguistic diversity is defined. It is a term chosen over more common terms, such as "white" or "European," in order to highlight the fact that it refers to institutionalized cultural norms rather than to the personalized cultural framework of particular individuals.

3 The authors first used this term in the mid-1990s as part of their work with a federally funded grant to prepare early childhood special education service providers. Its roots lie in this work, as well as in the work of such scholars as Wheatley (1992), Fletcher and Olwyer (1997), Fritz (1989), and others.

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Isaura Barrera and Lucinda Kramer

Isaura Barrera is Associate Professor, Educational Specialties Department, University of New Mexico, Albuquerque. Lucinda Kramer is Associate Professor, Special Education, National University, La Jolla, California.